

Rapid Onset by taylor_tut

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Summary:

Pennywise decides to mess with Eddie by giving Richie a high fever while they're in the confined space of the clubhouse but Eddie loves his friends more than he fears germs, but only barely. It's not as fluffy nor as angsty as it sounds.

Rapid Onset

Richie was in the middle of a sentence when his face flushed red and he trailed off abruptly, blinking a few times and wavering despite that he was sitting in the hammock of the secret clubhouse. Perhaps on a different day, they might have let it slide as a lost train of thought (although Richie never lost a train of thought; he loved hearing himself talk too much), but with everyone so on-edge, Ben frowned.

“Richie?” he asked, sounding as concerned as Eddie felt. The light in the clubhouse was dim, but even so, Eddie could see that Richie had started shivering almost the second that he’d picked up the shower caps that Stan had left there. Memories, Eddie hoped, but he had a sinking feeling in his gut already.

“What?” he asked, looking dazedly up at Ben. His eyes took a moment to focus and he pressed a hand to his forehead with a voiceless moan. “Woah.”

“Richie, what’s going on?” Beverly asked, scooting closer. The shivering was picking up now, becoming more like a heavy tremor than a light shaking.

“I feel,” he started, blinking and pressing his hand against his eyes. “Weird.”

“Weird how?” Bill asked. The Losers were closing in on him, flushed bright red and shaking a bit, pressed against the corner of the clubhouse tightly.

“R-really cold,” he stammered. “Dizzy. Dunno.”

“When did this start?” Eddie asked. It sounded almost like he was coming down with something, but when Richie shook his head as if he couldn’t remember, so he had to press further. “Did you wake up feeling like this?” Another shake of his head. “When you found Stan’s shower caps?” At that, Richie nodded, and when Eddie reached forward to feel his forehead, his blood froze in his veins at the low fever he found there.

"You're warm," he said, trying to keep the panic out of his voice. They'd been together all day, sharing breakfast at the same table—Richie'd poured him a cup of coffee, touched his mug, probably after coughing into his hands or touching his germy face or—and he'd been trapped in the car with him, Richie laughing loudly and being all friendly-grabby with Eddie's arm—and now here they were, in a small, confined space together, and Richie had a fever. Fevers meant that he was contagious, probably had been all day even if he'd felt fine, and now Eddie was going to get it, too; they all were. His wife wasn't here to take care of him. Pennywise would use their weakness against them in a heartbeat. He wanted to go home. For the first time in years, he wanted his mother.

"Eddie," Bill called softly, snapping him back to reality. "You okay? You l-look panicky."

Eddie had never quite liked when people knew he was freaking out about germs, but Bill was one of the few people in his whole life who'd grown to be empathetic about it rather than judgemental. They'd spent many years healing from the damages of their childhoods, all of them, but the others... they were harder, tougher, dealt with the world by creating a hard outer shell to keep the hardships out and their feelings in. Eddie and Bill couldn't do that.

Neither could Stan.

"I'm... not who we should be worrying about," Eddie dodged. Bill nodded, because that was true. Richie was still sitting on the hammock, shivering like mad, while Ben was kneeling in front of him and Bev, who'd taken a seat so close to Richie that Eddie swore he could SEE the microbial particles jumping off Richie and onto her like cartoon fleas.

"I don't feel very good," Richie complained. It wasn't a whine, which in itself set Eddie's senses on high alert, but Bev treated it as one, anyway and rubbed small circles into his back.

"I know, honey," she cooed. Eddie should have expected that from her. She'd always had a soft spot for Richie because the strongest trait they shared was the ability and personal compulsion to hide their real feelings. Bev, because she didn't want to talk about her

home life, and Richie because he probably thought that if he said a single thing that wasn't a joke, he'd burst into flame.

"What do you think we should do?" Ben asked, and Mike sighed.

"Well, Eddie said it's low-grade, right?" Eddie nodded. "Maybe we can just bring him back to his room and get him some Nyquill—"

"Richie, hey," Ben called, seemingly not paying attention to the plan. Eddie's eyes snapped back to the hammock wildly. "Look at me."

Richie was visibly deteriorating, having trouble keeping his eyes open now and leaning against Bev's shoulder.

"Come on, Rich," she tried, shaking him by the shoulder a little. "Can you answer him?"

"You're starting to freak me out," Ben admitted, and Eddie had to agree.

"Let's get him out of the clubhouse," Bill suggested. "We can get a better look at him in the light."

"Up we go," Ben said lightly, trying to help Richie to his feet but stopping when he at no point was able to support himself. His legs were gelatinous beneath him, quaking at the knees so hard that he seemed to have no strength to stand. Bill was quick to support his other side and they practically had to drag him out of the clubhouse and up to the forest above. Mike and Ben climbed up first so they could pull him up while Bev and Bill handed him off, his head lolling against his shoulder listlessly. Eddie didn't even have to touch him.

In the light, he looked miserable. Near translucently pale and shivering still, his arms were firmly wrapped around his midriff in a desperate attempt to keep himself warm against the very mild mid-day air.

"Jesus, man," Bill muttered, crouching down in front of him. "You look terrible. What's going on?"

Richie shook his head. Eddie hadn't come all the way up the ladder and now was feeling paralyzed with anxiety, unable to move his feet

to go up or down, so he just stood there with only his head poking out from the top of the clubhouse's cellar door. He watched as Bill did the same thing he'd had the confidence to do a moment ago, but not anymore, and press his palm to Richie's forehead. This time, however, it didn't elicit an exasperated sigh of disappointment, but a sharp intake of breath and a curse.

"You call this a low-g-grade fever?" he demanded, eyes turning wildly and angrily to Eddie. That was enough to get him moving, crawling up to the top with Ben's help and crouching next to Richie to feel his face. Richie leaned into the touch in a way he hadn't with Bill, probably totally unaware of who was even in front of him with his eyes closed as they were, and Eddie felt his heart jump into his throat. He felt panicked. He felt nauseous. He tugged at his collar and blinked hard.

"It was nowhere near that high just a few minutes ago," he explained gravely, taking Richie's chin in his hands and stroking his hot cheek with his thumb. "Holy shit, Rich, what the fuck did you catch?"

"Eds?" Richie blinked awake. "S'happening?"

"We need to get him to the hospital."

Mike hesitated. "We don't have time—"

"His body can't take much more of this," Eddie argued. "I've never even heard of a fever rising like this. It's got to be something systemic, like... I don't know, some kind of bird flu or some shit, or meningitis, or—Richie, have you been out of the country recently? Had any tick bites? Been bitten by an animal? Any weird rashes or—"

"Eddie," Bill stopped him, because Richie was holding his head in his hands, palms pressed firmly to his eyes.

"Can't think that fast," he moaned. "Can't... think at all. It hurts."

"Eddie's not going to ask you anything else, okay?" Beverly reassured. "You're doing fine."

Richie tried to look at her, Eddie thought, but before he could focus his eyes on her, they locked onto something seemingly behind her at

some distance and he froze.

"It's there," he said, newfound energy in the form of adrenaline giving him the strength to worm out of Bill and Ben's hold and scoot backwards, struggling to get to his feet.

"What is?" Mike asked.

"Fuckin'... fuckin' clown."

They looked at the forest. They looked at each other. They looked at Richie.

"Honey," Bev said, "there's nothing there."

"I can SEE it," he said firmly. "I can see... and when I close my eyes... It's there, I swear."

Eddie frowned. "He must be hallucinating," he said. "Oh, my God, he's fucking hallucinating. We're in the middle of fucking nowhere and none of us should have come back here at all and he's going to fucking die of some weird infection and the rest of us are gonna be killed by a goddamn clown all because YOU," he turned on Mike, "brought us back!"

"Eddie, calm down," Ben tried to mediate, and before the argument could escalate further, Bill interrupted.

"Uh, guys?" He pointed behind them at the same spot that Richie had been locked onto, and the hairs on the back of Eddie's neck stood on end as he saw a red balloon floating there from seemingly nowhere, rising and falling and rising and POPPING with the sound of horrific, demonic laughter that made them all jump as if they'd heard a gunshot. Richie toppled over at the same moment, but the red hue drained from his cheeks slowly and he began to sweat, no longer shivering. The deadly pale was replaced with his usual pinkish skin tone and Eddie dared to reach out a hand to his forehead and found it relievingly cool.

"It's breaking," he announced. "The fever's breaking."

"So it was a trick?" Bev asked, looking to Mike, who could do

nothing more than shrug. “How could Pennywise have even done something like that?”

“And if he was trying to kill Richie, why wouldn’t he have just... finished the job?”

Eddie shivered. “Because it was for me,” he realized aloud. “The rapid onset of a serious illness that I couldn’t identify, all while we’re trapped in a small space. If you guys hadn’t gotten him up here... I mean, that’s like, my nightmare.”

Bill paled a little. “That’s fucked up, even for Pennywise,” he said, and Eddie had to agree. Before he could spiral into more self-blame, Richie groaned.

“Why am I fucking soaked?” he asked in a horse but clear, present voice, and Eddie couldn’t help but laugh.

“Welcome back, man,” he greeted. He would get Pennywise back for this one in particular.